By Anne Branigin

Aging for the echoes of a tantrum in the background. Trying to negotiate deadlines with bath time. Distracted work calls while annoyingly eating a baby monitor.

As the coronavirus pandemic, this feels routine even as it has spread life for many parents. They’re the lucky ones: the parents who have been able to keep a job, work from home and find, however tenuous, some sort of patchwork solution to child care.

Many others are not so fortunate.

No better number illustrates this than the current unemployment figures. More than 3 million people have lost the workforce since last year, most of them women. Some of the industries hit hardest by the pandemic, such as retail and hospitality, employ a disproportionate share of female workers. But other women are being driven out of their jobs to take care of their children.

The United States has put in place temporary universal child-care programs before, and came close to making it the law of the land in the 1970s. Now the idea is gaining ground again. Republican and Democrats have made it common on child care than most other issues, and the pandemic has spurred them to stabilize the child-care sector.

President Biden’s $1.9 trillion coronavirus rescue package includes emergency funding for the child-care industry, as well as money to subsidize child care.

In a Wednesday hearing in Washington, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome H. Powell raised the issue of affordable child care, questioning whether the U.S. states’ composure has the United States’

“I will say, many other countries, our peers, our competitors . . . have a more built-up function for child care . . . We used to lead the world in female labor participation a quarter-century ago, and we no longer do — and it may just be that those policies know put us behind.”

Policy advocates see this moment as a prime opportunity to fix child care, when so many Americans have been forced to recognize its role in the economy, said Julie Kashen, director for women’s economic justice at the Century Foundation, a liberal think tank.

It’s the invisible work that makes all other work possible,” Kashen said.

“We build infrastructure like roads and bridges and communications systems so that people can work,” Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) said at the Democratic National Convention last summer, when she made the case for taking a different approach to child care. “It’s time to recognize that child care is part of the basic infrastructure of this nation, the basic infrastructure for families.”

Policy advocates argue that treating child care as infrastructure would have a twofold benefit to the economy: Not only would allow parents to continue working, it has the potential to create new employment opportunities and convert hundreds of thousands of existing roles into “green jobs” — offering benefits, protections and high enough wages to support a family.

Even pre-pandemic, many parents were priced out of the options that did exist in their communities.

One 2017 survey found parents paying $9,000 to $9,000, on average, for a year of day care for one child (in big cities, like New York or Washington, the cost is much higher). At the same time, almost half of American workers were telling in low-wage jobs.

Nina Perez, the national campaign director for early childhood at the advocacy group MarchOn, pointed out that even before coronavirus closures, the high cost of child care was driving mothers to leave their jobs and stay home.

“IT was not uncommon for us to get stories that child-care costs were as much as someone’s mortgage,” Perez said. “Those stories existed before the pandemic.”

Without government subsidies, it is hard to bring down the cost of care, Kashen said. There must be adequate staff, especially for young children, who need constant care. Facilities must have appropriate staffing, be safe, and provide a healthy and nurturing environment.

“There’s no efficiencies. There’s no economies of scale in child care. You can’t automate it,” Kashen said.

Day-care operators have razor-thin profit margins that come at the expense of low-paid child-care workers, who are primarily women of color. For these businesses, taking even a handful of children out of a program can push them into the red.

Katie Hamm, an executive at the Center for American Progress, who has co-authored several reports on U.S. child-care deserts, points out that excluding child care from conversations about infrastructure is a “very gendered approach” and effectively shuts out women of color from earning decent wages and being able to support their own families.

When the child-care industry crumbled last year, it primarily affected Asian, Latina and Black women, who make up about 42 percent of all U.S. child-care workers, according to the Department of Labor (women make up 95 percent of all child-care providers in the country). In 2019, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the median hourly wage for these workers was $11.65, including those who work in elementary and secondary schools.

They also rarely receive benefits like health insurance or pensions, Hamm said, and have a harder time making ends meet than workers in other industries. This left them especially vulnerable once the pandemic hit and the nation’s child-care system collapsed. If the Biden administration truly is to rebuild the U.S. economy and improve working conditions, Al-Jen Poo, executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, says a key component will be investing in child-care jobs into good jobs.

That means major government investment in the child-care industry so these businesses can be profitable, pay higher wages, develop career pathways, and provide benefits and workplace protections, like unions.

This last point is crucial, said author and educator Tamar Moore. For her book “Raising Brooklyns,” Moore spent three years with Caribbean child-care workers in the New York City borough.

“There needs to be a formally recognized occupational title,” said Moore. “Right now, terms such as ‘maid’ or ‘babysitter’ are used in still for similar types of domestic and care work, which makes imposing standards and regulation for this labor difficult. And, just as with other infrastructure jobs, like construction and engineering, there needs to be a guard against the precariousness of the work, and a structure to allow providers to determine their work conditions, she said.

“The only way, truly, to do that is to unionize,” Moore said.

Poo compared this to government investment in and regulation of manufacturing jobs in the 1920s and 1930s. “[Child-care] jobs can’t be automated, and they won’t be outsourced. They’re by definition the kind of in-person, service-driven professions that we need,” she said. “So we have an imperative already to figure out how we transform them from unsustainable, poverty-wage jobs to jobs that actually do secure and enable economic mobility for the people who do them.”

Experts agree that the place to invest is in early care and early learning programs. Once a child turns 5, schools take on a major share of the work in caring for children. Those same structures simply doesn’t exist for infants and younger children.

Infant and toddler care is the most expensive kind of care because it requires a low child-to-adult ratio.

Because of that, the sector employs the most low-wage workers; if these providers were paid according to their skill set, a year of day care would cost less than $15,000 to $20,000 a year, Hamm said.

A nationally subsidized program could make quality care affordable for millions, substantially raising wages for hundreds of thousands more women.

Hamm noted that unlike for older learners, this important period is often considered the parent’s personal responsibility, not a societal one.

“We have this kind of accepted contract, I guess, that when a child turns 5, all of a sudden they’re learning and therefore it’s a public good and every child should have it. But there’s nothing magical that happens on a child’s birthday that makes them start learning,” Hamm said.

Poo, of MomRising, echoed the importance of these programs.

“Some of the most rapid, rapid brain development happens in those years,” she said. “And we’ve put in some of the least amount of resources.”

Poo’s support for programs that invest in early childhood education programs increase a child’s likelihood of staying in school, graduating and avoiding incarceration.

“From a citizen perspective, from an economic perspective, we’re all impacted by these children,” she said.

It can also advance gender parity, both in the workforce and in the home, said sociologist Caitlin Collins, an assistant professor at Washington University in St. Louis. In her work, Collins has compared America’s approach to child care with that of its Western, industrialized peer countries, most of which have some version of nationalized care.

Without a national child-care system, women will never be able to fully choose their own path in the workplace and at home, because their hand is being forced and they can’t be productive.

This is the point experts returned to: Healthy, safe and cared-for children aren’t just good for working moms or the economy; they’re good for society.

Hamm, Perez and Kashen all brought up the Child Care for Working Families Act, supported by Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) and Rep. Bobby Scott (D-Va.), which would address many of these concerns by focusing on the quality of care for children and families and the children. The package would support universal access to high-quality early-childhood programs, cap child-care costs at 7 percent of income, pay out of pocket for child care, boost wages and training for providers in the field, and help niedly for inclusion of children with disabilities.

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“How we frame child care is a core issue for us,” Hamm said, “and it’s a core issue for employers.”

She mentioned that the Federal Reserve is planning to make child care a priority in its workforce and workplace policies.

But we shouldn’t stop there, Poo said.

“If you have a piece of a coin, sliced and incremental approach to address the economic and social pain that families are feeling, we will fail,” she said. “The cost of doing nothing is much, much greater, exponentially greater than doing too much.”

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